

# **Feedback from Cantus Focus Groups**

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## **Overview and Introduction**

This report summarizes the observations and feedback from two focus groups of Cantus supporters conducted in January and February 2019. The focus group events were held in the Cantus office, and the Cantus staff recruited the participants. Beth Anne Thompson, a Cantus board member, facilitated the discussions.

These focus groups included 24 Cantus supporters (six men and 18 women). The participants ranged in age from 30s to 70s, however the focus group members did not reflect racial diversity. While participants were not recruited by specific demographic criteria, the lack of diversity may be a reflection of the makeup of fine arts audiences in the Twin Cities or of the Cantus season ticket holders.

The first focus group was comprised exclusively of season ticket holders, and the second focus group was comprised of both season ticket holders and single ticket buyers. The single ticket buyers in the second focus group included lapsed season ticket holders.

The purpose of these focus groups was to get feedback and insights from current audience members about their experiences with Cantus. Topics covered in the discussions included:

- Overall views and perceptions of the Cantus experience
- How individuals learn about Cantus and share Cantus with others
- Feedback about Cantus programs (e.g., different concert types, themes, different musical genres, non-musical elements, etc.)
- Audience perceptions of and interactions with Cantus members and staff
- Perceptions of the accessibility of Cantus performances (e.g., venues, pricing, musical experience, etc.)
- Cantus educational outreach programs
- Cantus marketing and social media
- Cantus fundraising

The focus groups lasted approximately two hours each, and the participants were highly engaged in the discussions.

## **Views of Cantus: What makes Cantus Memorable and Unique?**

For these participants, Cantus represents a distinctive and unique artistic experience in the Twin Cities. Participants noted that Cantus was performing music that no one else is doing and is willing to take significant musical risks. Participants were appreciative of the high caliber of musical performance. They also appreciate that Cantus' mission and performances reflect socially conscious values and a strong connection to the community.

- I remember being blown away the first time I heard Cantus sing – I am a classical music fan, so I have a bit of sophistication in listening – but I had never heard a small group of singers sing with such precision and creativity. It was just astounding to me, and we have been coming ever since.

Participants described the Cantus experience as “vibrancy and freshness,” and “creative programming performed at a very high level...there is a warmth that comes through.”

Many participants remarked on the unique and distinctive Cantus sound and incredible artistry of the group:

- I so much appreciate the incredible artistry, the incredible tuning, the conviction that goes with it, and the amazing message. Most people don't have access to a group that tells you something and creates a program that is coherent like this.
- Tight harmony, energy and enthusiasm.
- High level of professionalism, a sense of intimacy and connection in the group.
- When I hear these voices blending together – I have marveled through the years at how they continue to find voices that blend together – and they end on a note, and the audience is just silent. You could hear a pin drop.

Participants noted that the Cantus experience is different every time, and the unique and sometimes unexpected programming engages and challenges the audience.

- I love their music selections – they lead me places that I wouldn't go otherwise.
- Artists who respect and challenge their audience. They seem to really enjoy singing together. It is contagious.

In both focus groups, there was significant discussion of the emotional and intellectual impact that Cantus has on its audience. Participants described being emotionally engaged and moved by Cantus performances:

- I know I'm going to walk away emotionally fulfilled; it fills me up when I am there. It is a really warm, happy place –I am grateful for that.
- [Cantus is a] premiere male choral group with a national footprint. Performing at a level that defies belief in many cases and producing an emotional and intellectual impact that is really rare among artistic organizations.
- My heart sings when I leave.
- A couple of participants described the Cantus concert experience as meditative: “Sometimes I just close my eyes and take it all in.”

### **Programming and Themes**

In general, the themes of the programs were seen as socially conscious, relevant and contemporary. Participants described the ability to create cohesive themes for programs including non-musical elements (e.g., poetry, images, video, etc.) as a unique aspect of the Cantus experience. As one participant described it: “It is challenging, it is stimulating, it is very touching. We are hearing stories in song and spoken word.”

In general, the participants were very appreciative of the risks taken by the group in the programming. Participants described the Cantus experience as an opportunity to learn about social issues as well as music. The opportunity to learn new things is a highly

valued aspect of the experience for most, and many participants felt that taking risks demonstrated the “trust” Cantus has for its audience:

- That is what makes this organization the premiere organization that it is – because they dare to do something, and they believe in their audience. They believe that there are enough of us that will bond with that and will be inspired ...
- I appreciate the risks the singers take at times, and I trust them. If it doesn't work, they are going to come back and figure something out.
- I know I will learn something at these concerts – sometimes it's a social issue and sometimes it's not, but I am going to learn something. Like the Estonian music – it was so interesting. I don't know what I am going to learn, but I am always going to learn something, and that adds to my anticipation of a concert.

The themes related to social issues were described as especially meaningful and personally moving.

- I look for the themes that are connected with people, whether social issues, grief, loss, how we treat other people with what is going on with our country with immigration, it seems to be very timely... it has brought me to tears many times. The music is very meaningful and personal.
- The homelessness program was exceptional.
- [The homelessness program] was a nice balance of the readings, visuals – on target. It was almost was like Ken Burns [PBS documentary filmmaker]

The groups discussed the cohesive integration of musical and non-musical elements within the programs. This year's Christmas program was commonly cited for its seamless integration of elements. As one participant noted, “this past Christmas show was one of the very best things that they have done, so creative – their choice of poetry was absolutely fantastic – really right on for our time.” The Estonian program and the homelessness program were also noted as particularly unified and cohesive programs.

Some raised concerns about the balance between musical and non-musical elements. For a few participants, non-musical elements were seen as distracting from the highly valued experience of the music:

- I find adding a different medium disconcerting. I have to change gears and it makes the concert lose momentum.
- Are the spoken sections needed as a break for the singers? Sometimes it feels like everyone is taking a break, and it takes me out of the moment.

One participant noted that some of the themes might be “risky” for new audience members. He noted that Cantus' core audience members are supportive of the themes, however. “Sometimes the theme gets in the way of the music, but I am always challenged. “

### **Introducing New or Unfamiliar Works**

Overall, participants valued the depth and breadth of material presented in the programs. Most participants respected the fact that Cantus often presents new and lesser-known works.

- One of the things I like about Cantus is that they sing music no one else sings. So if you want hear something that no one else is singing, go to Cantus. It is something that is unique.... There is such a wealth of choral music that doesn't get sung, that we don't know about unless someone like Cantus sings it.
- We need new composing and [Cantus] has helped that happen.

Programs that embraced different cultural traditions in music especially intrigued the participants. The Estonian program and programs including African percussion were viewed as accessible to the audience, yet very different from other Western choral traditions. As one participant remarked, "It is music I have never heard – that is what is so fun. The rhythms are different, the harmonies are different ... but they also seem universal."

In both groups, there was a discussion about "modern" and "atonal" music, centering on the recent Libby Larsen commission. The Larsen piece was described as "challenging" and "less approachable" by some participants. The participants see themselves as open to new and unfamiliar music, but they also expressed a need for a balance in the program.

- There is a funny balance between broadly what the audience wants and what is stimulating and interesting for the artists. It is just tricky.
- I look for beautiful music. I try to be open to the new composers, but I don't want a whole concert of that.
- The music has to be sufficiently melodic – if there are too many [pieces] that are a little less approachable, I leave somewhat unsatisfied.
- I am not as sophisticated as some of you here -- I don't understand the music to the level that most of you do.
- Obvious that there are varying levels of music and background knowledge in the audience – keep in mind that there is a range of people coming to concerts – they may need to communicate with them.

In the discussions, the groups made a number of suggestions for educating audiences about new, unfamiliar or challenging pieces. Most of the suggestions focused on ways to educate the audience members about what they are going to experience. Suggestions included:

- Better program notes on the pieces (esp. for new or lesser-known pieces)
- Program notes describing the rationale for selecting a piece (and perhaps which Cantus member chose it)
- Give the audience something to listen for in the piece: "A hint for listening or a clue might be helpful ... If you are trying to help people enjoy it, give people a key for enjoying it."

- One participant suggested that perhaps some of the spoken aspects of the concert could be devoted more directly to the music: “There are times that, especially when it is a more difficult piece or an unfamiliar piece – it is not a bad thing to help set the expectation and give people something to listen for.” One participant suggested a format similar to Minnesota Orchestra’s “Inside the Orchestra” concert (i.e., the piece is discussed with the audience before it is played).
- Pre-concert or post-concert lectures were also mentioned. Some participants saw this as an interesting idea, however, others believed that the people who attend lectures are those who are already more musically sophisticated.
- One participant suggested that Cantus send a pre-concert email with a clip or video introduction to the new work.

### **Responses to Different Cantus Program Types**

The groups were asked for their feedback on different programming types including the collaborative concerts, Covers, the Christmas programs, open rehearsals and Cantus Idol.

*Christmas Program.* This year’s Christmas program was described extremely positively by all of the participants. It was called “a coherent narrative”, “beautiful and moving”, and “the choice of poetry was mind expanding.” One participant commented that the “Lessons and Carols” format was “beautifully adapted for a modern audience, accessible but felt like Christmas.” The Cantus Christmas program is considered an essential part of family holiday traditions for several participants.

*Collaborative Concerts.* The overall feedback on the collaborative concerts was positive. Participants appreciated the introduction to new groups (e.g., Lorelei), and most thought it was rewarding to see Cantus interact with other choral or theater organizations. The collaboration with Chanticleer was noted as a highlight. “[The Chanticleer concert] was the best thing I have ever seen. Spectacular.” Several participants felt the Sweet Honey in the Rock concert was less collaborative in nature (i.e., felt like two separate concerts), and one participant remarked that Cantus “carried Sweet Honey.” A couple of participants suggested that Cantus should consider a collaborative concert with one of the local undergraduate men’s choral organizations (e.g., St. Olaf Limestones, St. Olaf Viking Chorus, Luther College men’s chorale, etc.).

*Covers.* The participants expressed mixed reactions to the “Covers” concerts. Some of the participants loved these concerts and thought they were “really fun.” However, some felt that one’s interest in the concert was dependent on their familiarity with the specific album: “If you don’t like the album, it isn’t as interesting.” Some participants thought that the former Pops Concert format was more engaging for younger audiences. As one participant noted, “it was a fun way to introduce kids because it was more contemporary music – as opposed to the Covers, the albums are more from the era of the Baby Boomers.”

*Cantus Idol.* Participants who had attended Cantus Idol had an overwhelmingly positive view of the event. Cantus Idol was described as “a fun evening of the singers giving it their all,” and the attendees “laugh a lot.” Idol was seen as “more personal than other

galas” in the Twin Cities and an important opportunity for “people to bond with the individual singers.” A few participants preferred the previous location (The Dakota), and there was a suggestion of adding a runway at Aria to give people seated at tables in the back a better experience.

*Open Rehearsal.* Approximately half of the participants had attended Cantus open rehearsals, and participants remarked that attending an open rehearsal provided a deeper view into the Cantus collaborative model, and gave them a “different understanding of the pieces.” As one participant remarked, he was “in awe of how they can put the program together without a leader.” Others said that it was “fun to watch them working” and to “see the interplay between the guys.”

### **Audience Engagement during Performances**

The groups made a number of comments about the audience experience of a Cantus concert. The most important aspect of the experience for many audience members is feeling emotionally connected to the group and the music.

- The emotional connection – It’s really important to me for any concert I go to, but I particularly feel it with Cantus. The authenticity.
- The singers are connecting with each other... it lifts the performance when I am seeing that happen – I can see that they’re living the moment of the music – I am already living inside the sound, but now we are living inside the same space, emotionally.

The width of the group’s circle during performance was a detail that affects the experience for some audience members:

- When they face out, it is a joy to see them and hear them – a wider circle feels more welcoming.
- [When they are facing in] it is like watching someone else having an experience rather than being part of it yourself.

### **Audience Attachment to the Group and its Members**

One clear theme that emerged from these groups is the intense connection the participants feel with the individual members of Cantus. The participants described a “sense of ownership” of the group, and described feeling like an “advocate” who is “spreading the gospel” of Cantus to others: As one remarked, “They are our own.”

The participants deeply value the opportunities they have to develop personal relationships with the singers. The post-concert interactions are defined as an integral part of the Cantus concert experience.

- We like small ensembles like St. Paul Chamber Orchestra and Cantus so we can identify with the individuals in the group. You get to know them, and you feel like you have a relationship.

- I think because there are only eight in the group – we are personally engaged with them... there is that personal connection. What I really enjoy in a concert is a lot of individuality where they are doing some solos, or playing the guitar or the percussion – just to see the individual attributes of each one is fun.

Many supporters commented that along with the personal connections comes significant sense of loss or “grief” when one of the singers leaves the group.

- Making the connection is wonderful – they are all so personable! But the thing that that leads to is, when someone leaves, there is a certain sadness.
- It is almost a grieving process too when there are members who have left who you have followed... you don’t know that new one.
- It has been interesting to watch the evolution of Cantus as people have rotated off and new people have come in. It has always worked, but I haven’t always been happy with the change. You miss the people who were there.
- Through all the changes and all the different people, there is still a culture [of Cantus].

Participants made a number of suggestions to address the changes to Cantus personnel over time. Participants recommended developing better strategies to introduce new Cantus members to the core supporters (e.g., using social media, email, video, “meet and greets”, concert talks).

Supporters also recommended developing strategies to honor past members of the organization. One participant recommended creating a “Where Are They Now?” feature on the Cantus website to highlight Cantus alumni. Other participants suggested inviting Cantus alumni to participate in a reunion concert.

Some well-loved pieces from the repertoire are also lost when members leave the group, adding to the sense of loss supporters feel. Several participants recommended re-adopting some of the older Cantus music. It is interesting to remember that many of our core supporters have a deeper history with Cantus compared to its current singers, staff, and board.

### **Cantus’ Educational Programming and Outreach**

The educational programming of Cantus was viewed as essential to the Cantus mission, and for some of these participants, it plays an important role in their decisions to donate to the organization. The educational outreach demonstrates the socially conscious mission of the organization and the singers’ commitment to sharing their craft as role models:

- Outreach for Education communicates that Cantus has a commitment to their craft – not only is it quality, but we are going to teach and share with other people; we’re going to open this up to a younger audience...
- It is important to have men who sing as role models for young singers.

Further, the educational programs are important considerations as supporters make decisions about donating to arts organizations:

- It really gives me great satisfaction to help people do what they love and to make a living doing it — and they're sharing that with the outreach and the education so it has grown through that – My little donation can be part of something so much bigger; that makes me feel really good.
- We look very carefully at outreach... I don't think I would donate to a fine arts organization that didn't have some way to perpetuate the arts.

### **Audience Cultivation Sources and Factors**

In the groups, the participants were asked how they first learned about Cantus. The most common way that individuals had learned about Cantus was through friends or family who were Cantus supporters. Several participants had learned about Cantus as members of the churches where Cantus regularly performs (e.g., Westminster, Excelsior, etc.). Four participants had followed Cantus since the group started at St. Olaf College. Community performances (Lake Harriet Bandshell, The State Fair) and media appearances (e.g., MPR, and "Almanac") were also noted as sources of introduction to the group.

Many of the participants had a background in choral or instrumental music themselves. The groups included music teachers, singers with other groups (past and present), and instrumentalists. Some participants were drawn to the unique experience of male choral singing. Several of the men in the group had participated in male choruses themselves, from both classical and barbershop musical traditions. Two participants noted that their initial draw to Cantus was related to their interests in Welsh male choral traditions.

The connection to St. Olaf College (and other Lutheran colleges) was important to several participants. Cantus was described as part of the "grand choral singing tradition in the Upper Midwest." Several participants expressed a sense of local pride and ownership when they spoke of Cantus:

- They are at the same time, homegrown and world class. Minnesota is a rich nexus of choral music – this incubator tempers and strengthens all choral groups and informs a premiere group like Cantus.
- Doing important work here. We are lucky to have them here -- They are our own.

### **Comparison of Cantus to other Groups**

In the discussions, the participants made comparisons between Cantus and other choral organizations including Chanticleer, Sweet Honey in the Rock, Dale Warland Singers, Rose Ensemble and VocalEssence. Overall, Cantus was described as on par or superior to the comparator groups.

- I have followed [Cantus], I would say, almost from the beginning. I have a background in choral work myself and care a lot about the arts scene in the Twin Cities, and I consider this – in my humble opinion – one of the best things we have going here in the Twin Cities. On a par with Chanticleer, if we want to compare ourselves.

### **Other Organizations Followed by our Audience Members**

Participants were asked to discuss other Twin Cities arts organizations that they attend regularly. It is clear that most of our audience members are well versed and active in the Twin Cities arts and music scene.

Other organizations frequented by our audience members included choral organizations (Great Northern Union Chorus, Gay Men’s Chorus, VocalEssence, Dale Warland Singers, Rose Ensemble), orchestras and other musical offerings (SPCO, Minnesota Orchestra, Minnesota Opera, Music in the Park) and both large and small theater companies (The Guthrie, Jungle Theater, Theater Latte Da, as well as small local/community theater companies). Several participants noted that ads in concert programs are an important way that they learn about different arts organizations in the Twin Cities.

### **Decision-making about Subscription Tickets**

The groups were asked to discuss how they make decisions about whether they subscribe to Cantus season tickets. Subscribers said it was “good to commit” and “get it on the schedule” to ensure that they would make it a priority.

The major factors that impact the decision to buy season tickets versus single tickets included schedule (e.g., locations, times, personal scheduling conflicts), flexibility (e.g., ability to design your own subscription package, ability to reschedule to a different day, ability to buy additional tickets at the subscription price) and the desire to support the organization (season tickets “are a commitment to quality” and “to help the [Cantus] organization”). The build-your-own subscription package was described as “a big difference” and a very important factor in the decision to buy season tickets. Several participants noted that buying additional tickets at the subscription price was a great way to introduce new people to Cantus.

Ticket pricing was not seen as a major factor in the decision to buy season tickets. Most participants thought that Cantus tickets were a good value and that the price was fair, compared to other arts organizations. Differing prices for the different venues was seen as a positive factor that could potentially remove financial barriers for new audience members. One participant cautioned that while the current ticket prices were fair, Cantus should not raise them significantly if they want to attract new audience members. She noted that Cantus faces significant competition for audience members with other arts organizations in the Twin Cities.

### **Venues and Barriers to Attendance**

Participants appreciated the fact that Cantus performs in different locations, and they like the availability of performances “near home.” As one participant remarked, “bringing the music close to me is important.” The participants noted that they generally select their performance locations based on practical criteria such as schedule, proximity to home, and availability of parking.

The vast majority of the participants had attended concerts at more than one venue, and while most had a favorite location, they were not wedded to a single venue. Trinity Church (Stillwater) was described as a very important location because it was potentially more accessible to rural audience members.

Daytime concert opportunities are also very important. One participant noted that daytime concerts faced less competition with other arts offerings in the crowded Twin Cities arts scene. Other participants noted that daytime offerings were appealing to older audience members.

Barriers to attendance were discussed. Two participants wondered if the use of church venues was an impediment for people who are not comfortable in church settings or come from different religious traditions. They suggested adding more non-church locations (e.g., the Swedish Institute, the Russian Museum).

A couple of participants commented that the programs do not run long enough (not enough performances). They noted that there is not time to recommend the concert to others after attending the performance.

Children and family life were also noted as barriers for attendance. Commonly, the Christmas program, the Covers/Pops concert, Lake Harriet bandshell performance and Cantus Idol were seen as the most “family friendly” for people with younger children. A couple of participants had also taken their children to open rehearsals with success.

The Christmas program, Covers, Lake Harriet and Cantus Idol were described as “more accessible to a mainstream audience” and good concerts for introducing new people to Cantus. One participant described these concerts as “risk free” for introducing Cantus to friends who may be “skeptics.”

### **Fundraising and Donations**

The participants discussed the factors they consider when making philanthropic decisions to support non-profit arts organizations. The general factors cited included:

- How donations are used by an organization
- How much of the donation goes to overhead
- If the organization has a socially conscious mission or community focus
- If they attend performances and really enjoy it

Participants were asked if the size of Cantus has any impact on their decisions to support the organization financially. Several noted that they prefer to support smaller organizations because their donations are more meaningful to a smaller organization:

- I know that when I give a gift to Cantus, it is being used now. It is being used for the education programs, it is being used for new music, and so I know it is producing some result right now, and that is important... I like to know where my money is going.
- We try to pick things where it will make some difference -- that it supports [the singers] full-time livelihood makes a difference to me – it relies on them being able to make a living doing it.
- Watching [open rehearsal] made it clear how much each one has to buy into it to make it successful – it's so obvious, and I contribute because I think that's a marvelous, endlessly creative way to keep an organization going... I love the organic-ness of that.

There was curiosity about the financial well being of the Cantus organization. Comparisons were made to the Rose Ensemble (which is folding), and there was some concern that smaller organizations may be at increased risk. As one remarked, “small organizations can sometimes be seen as fragile. How fragile is Cantus? It may impact donations. It can be a disincentive to give, if you don't know if the organization will survive. You need to present a stable face to the public.” Another remarked that when Cantus went from 9 members to 8, audience members were concerned that the decision was a sign that the organization was struggling.

For fundraising, one participant made an astute, practical suggestion:

- For arts organizations, I usually round up [subscription amount]. If it comes out to \$382, I round up to \$400. If you made that an obvious option, that might be good.
- Another suggested that you add a donation button to the ticket ordering process.

### **Staff of Cantus**

The participants who had interactions with the Cantus staff were very complimentary about them. They appreciated the responsiveness of the Cantus staff, and the fact that they “can call and actually talk to someone.” Another participant said, “I love the responsiveness of the staff – email is responded to personally and quickly.” Others remarked that it was nice to see and interact with the staff at concerts, and they appreciated that the singers acknowledged the staff during concert remarks.

### **Marketing Ideas**

In the groups, a number of marketing suggestions were made for Cantus, largely based on participants' experiences with other arts organizations. Many of the suggestions were related to audience recruiting incentives:

- “Bring a first timer and the ticket is free” [comparable to programs at Jungle Theater and the SPCO]
- Create a voucher system for subscription tickets (i.e., buy a certain number of tickets, use them as you wish throughout the season) [comparable to programs at Minnesota Orchestra, and The History Theatre]
- Develop a concert for season ticket holders to bring their friends
- Kids are free [comparable to program at SPCO]
- Implement a “Young Professionals” ticket or subscription price

Other marketing suggestions related to Cantus’ strategies for media, advertising and social media:

Advertising/Media Suggestions:

- Advertise in the concert programs of other organizations
- Advertise on NPR and other radio
- Continue appearing at the State Fair on NPR Day
- Advertise to the church congregations where Cantus performs
- Pursue opportunities for the National Anthem at the Twins or other professional sports games – [gives access to large audience and TV audience]
- Market directly to local schools, universities, colleges to appeal to a younger audience

Social Media Recommendations:

- Send a list of all-time Cantus favorites in an e-mail and let the subscribers vote on a piece to include in a future concert
- Create videos on Facebook (or in email) that can be shared/forwarded
- Use social media/email to share updates about Cantus tours/travels
- Connect more through email. Consider personalized emails to different audience member types.
- Email newsletter: Add more videos, information about tours, introductions to new members
- Create a social media “Check In” feature for concerts
- Consider other types of venues (e.g., Minnesota Orchestra’s “Ice House” concerts or brewery concerts that may appeal to younger audience)